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# ON GIVING NAMES TO TOWNS AND STREETS.

BY JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

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## ON GIVING NAMES TO TOWNS AND STREETS.

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To GIVE a true name to a town or a street is not so easy a matter as it may seem. Mistakes are frequently made, because it is thought a thing of little consequence. I shall suggest, in this paper, the importance of care in selecting the proper designation, not only for a city or village, but even for a street. I shall also contend that such designations should not be selected merely as pretty sounds, but as memorials of the past.

Ought we not to regard these names as historic monuments, and choose such as will commemorate the events and persons belonging to the history of the place? This appears to be a matter of no small importance for a country like this. In a nation which grows with such unprecedented rapidity as ours, there is frequent need of giving names to new states, towns, streets, and public buildings. Thus far, these appellations have been bestowed almost by accident. It has

been a happy accident when a state or town or a street has received a good name: as, for example, in states, Minnesota and Iowa; in towns, Canandaigua, Chicago, Milwaukee; in streets, Bowdoin Street, Federal Street, Chauncy Street. More commonly, the names given have been chosen at random, without any selection, by some hurried official, who took the first appellations which occurred to him, or which met his eye in a classical dictionary or on a map of Europe.

But we ought to consider that to give a name to a place is a very important act, involving no little responsibility; and should, therefore, be confided to judicious and enlightened persons; and that there are certain rules to be followed and objects to be secured in giving names.

Before naming an infant, we hesitate and consider, and very properly; for the name is one which is to designate him through life, and every time it is uttered will make an impression on the hearers corresponding to the character or association which belongs to it. When a child is called "Praise God Barebones," "Be Thankful Maynard," "Lament Willard," or "Search the Scriptures Moreton," is it not evident that he has been saddled with a burden which will weigh him down through life? For such phrases were not, as Hume erroneously supposes, assumed by the parties themselves, but have been found by Mr. Lower (as he tells us in his work on English surnames) in the baptismal registers. Every time the man weighted with such a name is spoken to or spoken of, a slight sense of ridi-

cule attaches to him in consequence thereof. But, finally, every man dies, and his name with him; but a city, a town, or a street may live a thousand years. During all its existence, if it have an insignificant appellation, or one suggesting unfavorable contrasts or disagreeable associations, the town or street is injured. It may be no great injury, not much each time; but multiply the slight injury its bad name inflicts on each occasion by the number of times the name is spoken, and you see that an inappropriate name may do a place a good deal of harm. If a little rural town is called Rome, Paris, or London, the word inevitably suggests unfavorable comparisons; whereas, if it were entitled Riverside or Greenfield, it would pleasantly suggest its true characteristics.

A name is a matter of much more consequence than we are apt to suppose. Lord Bacon says: "Name, though it seem but a superficial and outward matter, yet carrieth much impression and enchantment: the general and common name of Græcia made the Greeks always apt to unite (though otherwise full of divisions among themselves) against other nations whom they called barbarians. The Helvetian name is no small bond, to knit together their leagues and confederacies the faster." \*

If you were about to move into the country, and were hesitating between two towns, in other respects having equal attractions, and one of them had a pleasant name, while the other was called Squash End or

\* Bacon's Works: Union of England and Scotland.

Muddy Creek, would not that decide you? I think so. I have no doubt that many places have been seriously injured, as to their population, by unfortunate titles. The same is true of streets. In the town where I spent my boyhood, one street was called "Poverty Lane," and another "Burying-ground Lane." I do not think a man would willingly select either for his residence.

It is worth while, therefore, to consider what constitutes a *good* name. It is one which individualizes, with which there is no bad association, which is not trivial nor ridiculous, but which leaves a pleasant impression.

"Unhappy," says Salverte, "is the man whose heart is cold at the name of his country, heard in a foreign land." But can his heart beat with much delight at the name of his native town or street, if the town be called "Painted Post," or "Passykunk," or "Rattlesnake Bar," or "Gratis," "Scipio," or "Treddyfinne," (all in the census), or the street be called "Petticoat Lane," "Leg Alley," "Stinking Lane," or "Snore Hill," each one of which has been borne by some unfortunate locality?

The qualities required for a good name seem to be individuality, character, and agreeable associations. A name is intended, first, *to distinguish the individual from all other individuals*. Hence all names are bad which are common. Those of us whose surnames are frequent are unfortunate therein. Mr. Lower gives a list of sixty of the most common surnames in England, taken from the registers of births and deaths.

The Smiths stand at the head of the list, 5,588 having been born to that name in Great Britain in the year 1837-38. Next come the Joneses, 5,353; Williamses, 3,490; and others following in this order: Taylor, Brown, Davies, Thomas, Lewis, Evans, Roberts, Clark, Johnson, Robinson, Jackson, Walker, Wood, Wright, White, Turner, Thompson, Hall, Greene, Baker, and Hughes.

These cannot help themselves. But what shall we say to those who deliberately repeat the same word over and over again in naming counties and towns? In the Census for 1870, and the United States Postal Guide for 1880, we find these curious facts. The same appellations are often repeated in every State; every name of any consequence occurring a dozen or twenty times, many forty or fifty. Some of the least common, like Pittsburg, Plainfield, Butler, Canaan, Cedar Creek, Buffalo, Huntington, Windsor, Rutland, occur from ten to twenty times each. There are twenty-five Fairfields, twenty-six Ashlands, fourteen Adamsvilles, twenty-seven Salems. There are eight Roxburys, eleven Bostons, four Baltimores, eight Philadelphias, and three New Yorks. There are forty-five towns named Richland, thirteen named Rome, and eleven Paris. The insignificant name of Centre has been given to forty-seven towns. Nineteen have been called Brown; ten, Smith, beside many Smithfields, Smithlands, Smithburgs, and Smithvilles. There are ten towns for which no better name could be found than Settlement. Of statesmen and heroes, we have

fifty-seven towns named for Perry, fifty-two for Wayne, twenty-seven for Van Buren, fifty-seven for Harrison, eighty-three for Franklin, eighty for Jefferson, one hundred and twenty for Jackson, and one hundred and thirty-four for Washington. There are, in the Union, ninety-nine towns named Union, and sixty-five named Liberty; from which we may possibly infer that our people love Union about one-third more than they love Liberty. The worst fact about this repetition is that there are often many towns of the same name in the same State. At one time there were thirty-nine towns named Jackson, in the single State of Indiana; eight towns named Pike, and thirteen named Springfield, in Ohio; six called Sugar Creek in Indiana; thirty called Union in Ohio; and thirteen called Union in Arkansas.

Besides these foolish repetitions, there is often a want of individual character. It would have been better to have called New York by the name Manhattan, and to have called Boston either Shawmut or Trimount, as at first. When the Court resolved, on Sept. 7, 1630, that Trimountaine should be called Boston, and Mattapan Dorchester, they made a mistake. The original names were more individual and characteristic than the new ones. There is scarcely a town in Massachusetts but has borrowed its name from some English town, instead of retaining, as it might have done, the old Indian word, or taking a name from its situation. The names lose their significance, when thus transported. Our Suffolk (a place of the south people) is farther north than our Norfolk. Our Dorchesters, Worces-

ters, and Lancasters have no remains of Roman camps; our Salisbury has no cathedral; our Melrose no ruined abbey. There was something affectionate in thus covering the new continent with the familiar patronymics from dear old England, but it would have been better to have kept some of the Indian names. It has always been so, however. Emigrating hordes drop all along their route the names of places brought from their native country. Thus Mr. Poccoke's *India in Greece* tries to show from what part of the Punjaub the inhabitants of each section of Greece came, by means of similarity of the appellations of mountains, rivers, and towns.

Insignificant names, also, are bad ones; that is, those which are merely convenient, but have no meaning and no association, historic or otherwise. Such are alphabetical titles of streets, like those at South Boston, A Street, B Street, C Street, etc.; and the numerals which prevail in so many of our cities, as New York and Philadelphia: 1st Street, 2d Street, 3d Street; where your friend lives in East 18th or West 35th. These names are objectionable, because they fail in individuality and character, the two essential conditions of a good name. Even the convenience of such names is doubtful. It seems easy to find a person, if he lives in 12th Street, because you can begin and count till you get to twelve. But, on the other hand, you are more likely to forget a number than a name; and, again, it is hard to recollect the location of a number. A Bostonian knows just where Water Street, Milk

Street, Franklin Street, Summer Street, Bedford Street, are; but suppose they were numbered 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, would it be so easy to remember their exact position? But it becomes more difficult, when this is repeated over and over in half a dozen cities. Drop me in London, in the Strand, and tell me to go to High Holborn; put me down in Paris on the Italian Boulevard, and tell me to go to the Rue de Seine or the Rue Taitbout, and I should know the direction I ought to take; but put me in Walnut Street, Philadelphia, and tell me to go to the corner of Eighth and Pine, and I am more confused. These numbers leave no picture in the mind.

A name, good in itself, is bad when it is insignificant, — when it means nothing. The Continental Hotel is a good name, but it means nothing. That hotel in Philadelphia is no more a continental hotel than the Astor House in New York or Willard's in Washington. Will it be believed that the sponsors of that building rejected the fine historic and strictly Philadelphian designation of the "Penn Manor House," which was suggested to them, for the sake of taking this high-sounding but unmeaning word, "Continental"? I am told that this "Continental Hotel" actually stands on the ground once belonging to William Penn, which fact, if true, would have given a perfect propriety to the proposed and rejected designation. Suppose our Faneuil Hall had been called City Hall or State House, how much less famous would it be! But its individual and purely local name enabled it to take on its historic associations easily.



Second-hand names are always bad. The "Tremont House" was a very good name for a Boston hotel; but when applied to a hotel in Chicago, where there is not even a single hill, it becomes insignificant. So "Revere" is a fine name for our hotel; for it brings up associations of our famous Boston mechanics, and of the time before the Revolution, of which the poet sang,—

"When I was bound apprentice to Colonel Paul Revere,  
Oh, what a lot of knick-knacks the British sent us here!"

But, if a hotel in St. Louis is called the Revere House, it seems impertinent.

On a board in front of a stage-office in Buffalo, I once read, "Stages start from this house for China, Sardinia, Holland, Hamburg, Java, Sweden, Cuba, Havre, Italy, and Penn-Yan." The last name, by the way, is one which has individuality and character, but is wanting in taste. It was a town settled by Pennsylvanians and Yankees, and therefore named Penn-Yan. A name originally commonplace or second-hand sometimes succeeds in getting an individual character in course of time. Our Boston has become so large and important a place, and has so much history connected with it, that it has displaced the original Boston from the minds of men, and has itself become the chief town of the name. Lyons, in France, once shared its name with several other towns. It was called *Lugdunum*, which means a hill by the water; and so Leyden and Laon had the same name. But now Lyons has an independent nominal existence. So Milan at first

meant merely "in the middle of the country," and was Mit-land, a name of German origin. Now Milan, or Milano, stands alone. Naples means only the New City, or Newtown (Neapolis); but no one now thinks of that commonplace etymology. No one thinks that Naples is the same as Newton, Neuville, Neustadt, Newburgh, Villanuova, Villeneuve. Still less would any one imagine that "Carthage" means the New City, *Carthada* in the Punic having this signification. Tyre was the old city, Carthage the new one.

Names of places should be in good taste. All pedantic names and grotesque names should be avoided. We all know how singularly the State of New York was sprinkled with classic titles by some travelling schoolmaster, and what ridicule has attached to the poor places ever since. Those which have become important, like "Syracuse" and "Utica," have conquered the ridicule; but how poor are such names of towns as Homer, Ovid, Marcellus, compared with Skaneateles, Canandaigua, and Cazenovia!

The original name of Cincinnati was a barbarous one, composed of four languages, Greek, Latin, French, and English. It was Losantiville, meaning the town opposite to the mouth of the river Licking: *L* for Licking; *os*, mouth; *ἀντί*, opposite to; and *villc*, town. Pedantry could hardly go further than this.

Names which are picturesque, which have a pleasant sound and pleasant associations, are in good taste. The Indian names are generally very agreeable, and it is much to be lamented that more of them had not been

preserved. Perhaps it is not too late to restore some of the beautiful Indian names. It would be a pleasure to be able to date one's letters from "Winona," in Minnesota, or from "Osceola," in Iowa. In Michigan, we have Kalasca, Oscoda, Iosco, Alcona, Tuscola. Sometimes, a simple incident or fact gives a pleasant name, like "White Pigeon" in Michigan, or "Swan Rivers" in Wisconsin. "Mad River" is the name of three different towns, all in Ohio: it is not a very pretty name; but it is in reality identical with "Fontarabia" in Spain, which has an interesting sound enough.

In naming the streets of a city, it is desirable to make the names historic monuments of the men and events of past history. We erect, at considerable expense, statues—not always most pleasing—to Webster and Franklin and Everett. But, without expense, we can preserve in our streets the memory of wise and good men, whose feet have formerly walked in them. Something of this has been done; but why should it not be carried out more systematically, and not be left to accident? We have in Boston streets called Hancock and Adams, Bowdoin and Boylston, Chauncy and Channing, Endicott and Leverett. But many of the most eminent of our historic characters are not thus remembered. Salverte, whose essay in French, in two volumes, on the *Names of Men, Nations, and Places*, is classical, says: "The history of the names of streets belongs to the history of a town. They often recall the periods of its enlargement and decoration. These names are also a sort of monuments for the history of

manners and of civilization. . . . In our day, we in France have followed noble inspirations. The names of our streets have recalled our victories, our artists, our distinguished writers, our heroes who died fighting for their country. Such is the charm of this method that we wonder why it is not adopted wherever social man has a sense of his dignity. In London, I should involuntarily ask for the street of John Hampden, and that of Algernon Sydney. And I would go a step further. In the streets which have an historic name, I would place on the wall a simple inscription, recalling to all minds the memorable occurrence, the services of an illustrious man, or the labors of a man of genius."

If M. Salverte were to come to Boston, being somewhat acquainted with its early and Revolutionary history, he would ask, but ask in vain, for "Sam. Adams Street," "Gorges Street," "Miles Standish Street," "John Endicott Street," "Saltonstall Street," "William Vassall Street," "Isaac Johnson Street," "William Pynchon Street." Nor would he find any suitable memorial of Governor John Winthrop, John Wilson, the first minister, or Mr. William Blackstone, the first inhabitant of Shawmut. Concerning the last, Mr. Drake, in his work on the history of Boston, says: "To this memorable man, as to others before his time as well as since, justice will eventually be done. And though the noble city, whose foundation he laid, be the last to honor his name, it will one day, it is not to be doubted, pay the debt it owes his memory, with interest. Shall not the principal street in the city bear his name?"

Other names of men distinguished in the early history of Boston come up, as we turn the pages of Mr. Drake's book. There are Roger Williams, proto-martyr of religious liberty in New England; John Eliot, first missionary to the Indians; William Bradford, John Cotton, Sir Henry Vane, Anne Hutchinson, Governor Bellingham, John Leverett, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Mayhew. If these are to be used for street appellations, as historic monuments to these early Boston pioneers, it seems necessary to give the whole name. "Vane Street" would hardly suggest the great Puritan, but "Harry Vane Street" would carry with it a history. Doubtless, it would seem awkward at first to give the whole name. But, in a month's time, the awkwardness would pass by, and it would appear quite natural. Besides, we are not proposing to give such titles to all our streets, but only to a few. For example, on the new land now being made at the west of the city, how well it would be to have a series of such old historic streets. The purpose of those who named them seems to have been to give aristocratic titles, such as Arlington, Newbury, Marlborough, Clarendon. The only distinguished person who ever bore the name of Arlington was a member of the Cabal, "the worst ministry," says Hume, "that England ever saw." Macaulay describes the character of Arlington as that of a man profoundly indifferent to all forms of government and all forms of religion. It was hardly necessary to give the name of such a man as that to one of our streets, nor that of "Marlborough"

to another,—one of the basest statesmen England ever saw, who was ready to sell any master or betray any government. But these are probably fancy names, and given to the streets from a kind of school-girl taste, just as country people call their children Seraphina Betsey or Gloriana Mary Jane.

It seems to us that, if our streets had historic names it would make the city more interesting,—Roger Williams Street, Harry Vane Street, Cotton Mather Street, John Eliot Street, John Winthrop Street. But, if this cannot be accomplished, if those in authority prefer pretty and romantic names to historic ones, may we not at least hope that the name of ARABELLA, which is both historic and beautiful, may be given to one of the principal avenues in the additions to the city? *Arabella* or *Arbella* was the name of the vessel which arrived in Salem River, June 12, 1630, with Governor Winthrop and some of his assistants, bringing the charter of the Massachusetts colony, and therewith the government transferred thither. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts came over in the “*Arabella*”; on her deck was held our *Great and General Court*, before it was held on this continent; and she brought to America those who were to found our city of Boston. And in this vessel came with her husband, Isaac Johnson, the noble lady after whom the ship itself was called,—the Lady *Arbella* Johnson, daughter of the Earl of Lincoln, one who left the luxury of her English home to come to what seemed then a lonely wilderness. She died within three months after her arrival, and was

buried in Salem; but no monument has ever been placed over her grave. Can we not afford to her the monument of a chief street in our city, of which her husband was one of the chief founders?

We have pleased ourselves with the idea that the magnificent avenue which goes from the Public Garden to Brookline, shaded by rows of trees, and with stately homes on either side, should bear one day the name of this generous and devoted woman, and be called Arabella Avenue. Or, if it be desirable that the street now called Arlington should begin with an "A," could we not depose the low-minded English statesman, and call it "Arabella Street"? In names that are uncommon, it would perhaps not be necessary to give more than the surname. "Bowdoin Street," "Chauncy Street," "Channing Street," and perhaps "Hancock Street" are already sufficiently suggestive of the historic characters. When the whole name is long or inharmonious, it might not be well to use it. "Ferdinando Gorges" and "Richard Saltonstall" would be too long. "Gorges Street" and "Saltonstall Street" might be sufficient. But there could be no objection to "Sam. Adams Street," "Harry Vane Street," "John Cotton Street," "John Wilson Street." To some streets might be affixed the names of the prominent early settlers mentioned in the "Book of Possessions"; such as "Bellingham," "Scotto," "John Cotton," "Aspinwall," "John Odlin." Mr. Drake objects, very reasonably, to the *destruction* of significant names, full of historic associations, which has already taken place,

and asks that the old word should be restored. Why change such names as Rawson's Lane, Governor's Alley, Scottow's Alley, Auchmuty Street, Alden's Lane (named for Capt. John Alden), Belknap Street, Love Lane, Pudding Lane? Why, instead of "Revere Street," could we not have "Paul Revere Street," and instead of "Sumner Street" have "Charles Sumner Street," as we already have a "John A. Andrew Street?"

Is not, then, the naming of new streets a matter of some importance? And, if so, ought it not to be done with judgment, and by well-informed persons?

How shall this be accomplished? Suppose that the Massachusetts Historical Society should petition the City Government of Boston to appoint a Commission, who shall have in charge the naming of new streets and of proposing alterations in the names of old ones. These Commissioners should have no compensation, and some of them should be selected by the authorities from the members of the two Historical Societies. They ought also to be requested to propose inscriptions to put up against the walls of the streets to designate localities which have been distinguished in the history of the city by any memorable events. We shall thus be doing only simple justice to the past; we shall awaken in the minds of strangers and our own people the memories of great men and great deeds; we shall take from life something of its bare hard outline, and fill the air around us with rich associations. With these records of the past around, life becomes more



interesting. When the names of our heroes and martyrs are thus attached to the soil by a permanent record, their blood cries from the ground to their children, calling on them to imitate their virtues.

The antiquities of Boston are disappearing. The old Hancock House has been suffered to go. Very probably the Old State House, and perhaps Faneuil Hall, will soon be replaced by tall granite stores, their heavy walls resting on pipe-stems of slender iron. Let us, at least, have a few names of our streets to show that Boston has a history, and is not as new as Chicago!

When I was a boy, I used to pass by the house on Tremont Street, then standing, where Sir Harry Vane had lived when Governor of Massachusetts. I can still see in my memory its walls, black with age, and its diamonded windows. If by this paper I can induce those in authority to give the name of "Harry Vane" to some important street, and that of "Arabella" to another, I shall feel repaid for writing it; and I now dedicate it to the Board of Aldermen, Board of Street Commissioners of Boston, and to our two Historical Societies.

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